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Non-dual Reality and Empirical Existence in Advaita Vedānta and Ghazālī's Metaphysics of Unity

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Abstract This essay explores the ways in which two distinct spiritual traditions, Ghazālī's Ṣūfīsm and Śaṅkarian Advaita Vedānta, articulate an exclusive metaphysical affirmation of the Ultimate Reality with an empirical recognition of relative existence. Both perspectives are shown to be radically absolutist in their discernment of the Real and in their denying metaphysical reality to other-than-the-Absolute. This raises the question of the ontological status of relativity and empirical existence. Although Islam would seem to assign a greater reality to the world of relativity and human experience, Ghazālī's most metaphysical treatise, *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights), utterly denies the intrinsic reality of creatures in themselves. Similarly, Śaṅkara affirms the non-existence of *māyā*, the principle of ignorance and duality, as a superimposition upon *ātman*, the Divine Self immanent to all. Ghazālī concedes, however, that relative existence is "metaphorically" existent (*majāz*) while Śaṅkara acknowledges the "transactional" reality (*vyāvahārika*) of empirical existence. Such recognitions involve a multi-stratified view of reality that must account for both metaphysical consistency and empirical access to Reality. This essay shows that although fundamental parallels between the two worlds of meaning can be highlighted, their respective metaphysical perspectives and views of relativity are also quite distinct inasmuch as they are informed by profoundly different religious and traditional contexts.

Keywords metaphysics · non-dualism · empirical existence · Advaita Vedānta · Ṣūfīsm

This essay is a comparative study of Śaṅkara's Advaita and Ghazālī's metaphysics of Divine Unity. Śaṅkara's works are evidently central in any inquiry into Hindu

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non-duality as he has been recognized as the most influential representative of the school of Advaita Vedānta. The choice of Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) might be less expected in a comparative study of non-dual views of the Ultimate. Ghazālī is arguably more often associated with Islamic law, the critique of philosophy, or the ethical dimensions of the Ṣūfī path. However, this essay will be primarily based on his *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights). This work is, within Ghazālī's opus, by far the most representative of the speculative dimension of Islamic mysticism. It is therefore the most directly concerned with the non-dual implications of the Islamic doctrine of Divine Unity. With regard to Śaṅkara, who lived some three hundred years before Ghazālī, this essay will focus on works that the consensus of current scholarship has held as authentic. This means, first of all, the commentaries, or *bhāṣya*, on the *Brahmasutrā*s and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In addition, other works will be given secondary attention, since Śaṅkara's whole opus is characterized, by contrast with Ghazālī's diverse and multilayered work, by an unremitting concentration on non-dual metaphysics. Other fundamental Advaitin works have also been perused and cited in this essay, primarily the verse commentary, or *kārikā*, of Gauḍapāda on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, as well as Śaṅkara's own explanations of this text. The foundational character of this *kārikā*, as well as the meaningful parallels and contrasts that it will help highlight, warrant attention for our current purpose.

There has been a wealth of translations and scholarly literature on Ghazālī and Śaṅkara in the last decades. English translations of several sections from Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revivification of Religious Sciences) have been published. This comprehensive compendium of Islamic knowledge, from theology to ethics and mysticism, remains Ghazālī's masterpiece. Richard M. Frank (1994) and Michael E. Marmura (2002) have examined the role of *kalām*, more specifically the rational theology of Ash'arism,[1] in the elaboration of Ghazālī's opus. Frank has concluded emphatically that Ghazālī's thought is "fundamentally incompatible with the traditional teaching of the Ash'arite school" (1994: 87).[2] In his spiritual autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (The Deliverance from Error), Ghazālī himself makes it clear that rational theology is merely an apologetic tool. It cannot fulfill the needs of those in search of ultimate knowledge. For Ghazālī, only Ṣūfīsm, both speculative and practical, can provide the means of spiritual realization. The *Mishkāt* is, among Ghazālī, the treatise that is most explicitly focused on those means. Interestingly, Frank does not focus on the *Mishkāt*, which he considers almost exclusively in reference to psychology. Taking an opposite stand, Marmura has emphasized what he considers to be the pervasive Ash'arite nature of Ghazālī's works. In a way that is more directly relevant to the current inquiry, he has also highlighted both the limitations of Ash'arite theology and its propaedeutic function

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[1] Ash'arism is the main school of Sunnī rational theology. It was founded by the ninth/tenth-century theologian Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. It is based on the foundations of Qur'ānic scripture and the use of discursive reason to support the tenets of faith.

[2] "His rejection of kalām as a simplistic discipline that is inadequate either to the achievement of genuine intellectual understanding or to the attainment of higher religious insight is obvious from the outset" (Frank 1994: 87).

in Ghazālī's mysticism.[3] Frank Griffel's *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (2009) centers on the philosophical and cosmological dimensions of Ghazālī's thought by challenging the conventional view of Ghazālī as a theologian critical of philosophy and by emphasizing, among other points, the Avicenian dimensions of his thought. In addition, in this authoritative book, Griffel (2009: 246) approaches the *Mishkāt* from the point of view of cosmology, with a focus on the final section of the book, known as the "Veil Section." He touches upon the question of the unicity of existence mostly in reference to Alexander Treiger's (2007) distinction between "monotheism" and "monism."[4] By and large, however, the teachings on the unicity of being that are central in the *Mishkāt*—the so-called *waḥdat al-wujūd* that became later identified with the school of Ibn 'Arabī—have received little attention. They have sometimes been treated as adventitious to Ghazālī's work, or even inauthentic.[5]

Although Śaṅkarian Advaita has remained a central intellectual reference in both Indian intellectuality and Hindu Studies, it has been rarely approached from the point of view of comparative metaphysics. The main comparative debates have been centered on the relationship between Śaṅkarian Advaita and Buddhism. Was Śaṅkara fundamentally at odds with Buddhist Śūnyavāda,[6] as it appears from some of his polemical writings, or was he himself a crypto-Śūnyavādin? Most traditionalist Hindu scholars argue that the seemingly Buddhist dialectics of Śaṅkara was purely strategic, a kind of dialectical "skillful means."[7] Others have argued that Śaṅkara's Advaita and Buddhism simply correspond to different phases in the development of Indian non-dualism or two different crystallizations of the same spiritual insights.[8] Besides the question of the relationship between Advaita and Buddhism, there are actually few studies of Advaita and non-Hindu traditions with a main focus on comparative metaphysics. Among the latter, Reza Shah-Kazemi's seminal and thorough *Paths to Transcendence* (2006) is entirely centered on a comparative analysis of Śaṅkara's work, the Ṣūfī gnosis of Ibn 'Arabī, and the writings of the German mystic Meister Eckhart (*ca*. 1260–*ca*. 1328). Other important comparative works have approached figures and dimensions of the

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[3] "These discussions reveal quite plainly that Ash'arite *kalām* when not sought as an end in itself can also be an aid to the *sālik*, the sufi wayfarer. It can bring the *sālik* closer to 'knocking at the doors of gnosis'" (Marmura 2002: 110).

[4] "(T)he monistic paradigm views the granting of existence as essentially *virtual* so that in the last analysis God alone exists, whereas the monotheistic paradigm sees the granting of existence as *real*" (Treiger 2007: 1, cited in Griffel 2009: 255; emphasis in the original). Arguably, the term "monism," although meaningful in the context of a contradistinction with "monotheism," fails to capture the complexity of the *Mishkāt*'s metaphysics, which I would prefer to refer to as a multilayered non-dualism.

[5] See Griffel 2009: 10–11.

[6] See Ingalls 1954.

[7] "It was to attract to the Sanātana fold, the convinced Buddhists, those susceptible to Buddhism and their fellow travellers. He adopted practically all their dialectic, their methodology, their arguments and analysis, their concepts, their terminologies and even their philosophy of the Absolute, gave all of them a Vedantic appearance, and demolished Buddhism. That is why the 'Crypto-Buddha' is also called 'born enemy of Buddhism,' and also the saviour of Sanātana Dharma" (Mudgal 1975: 187).

[8] See, for instance, C. Sharma (1987: 318) and Coomaraswamy 1943.

encounter between Hinduism and Islam mostly from a historical or literary point of view or within a relatively limited scope.[9]

From a historical point of view both Śaṅkara and Ghazālī have been hailed as crystallizers and consolidators of their respective perspectives. They have also be seen as revivificators of their spiritual traditions. Śaṅkara is credited with formulating, or reformulating, a non-dualistic interpretation of Vedic scriptures that is both traditional and couched in fresh dialectics. There is very little extent works of Advaita before Śaṅkara, but there is scholarly consensus on his non-dualistic insights and positions not being new. As Hajime Nakamura has stated in his reference work, *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy* (2004), the contribution of Śaṅkara was that of a genial synthesizer while being "completely conservative" in its outlook.[10] As for Ghazālī, who has been referred to as *ḥujjat al-islām*, "proof of Islam," he has been credited with an effective harmonization of the legal and mystical dimensions of Islam (Karamustafa 2007: 107). In doing so, in Éric Geoffroy's felicitous terms, he "did not measure Sufism with the yardstick of orthodoxy: he explained Islam through the light of Sufism" (2010: 83). He made explicit the connection between the inner life of ethics and spirituality and the general religious economy of Islam. Nevertheless, Śaṅkara's and Ghazālī's works are held to be foundational and authoritative references in their respective traditions. A comparative examination of their metaphysics is therefore far from being a marginal academic exercise; it can open access to quite meaningful avenues of understanding of Hinduism and Islam at large.

Contemplative Metaphysics and its Pluralistic Horizon

Śaṅkara and Ghazālī can be considered as representatives of traditional contemplative metaphysics. By traditional is meant that they were both pre-modern in their outlook and that their works are linked to a coherent chain of intellectual and spiritual transmission. The adjective contemplative alludes to the principle that metaphysics is not to be understood here as a merely speculative intellectual discipline. It is indeed intrinsically connected to practical ways of spiritual realization through contemplative exercises. What may characterize traditional contemplative metaphysics, by contrast with theology or rational philosophy, is their general ability to envisage reality, and Reality in an ultimate sense, from a variety of vantage points. Even when they affirm the superiority of their own favored view of Reality, they also tend to consider the extensive plurality of perspectives. They do so by virtue of their claim of an all-encompassing and universal comprehension of the Real. This is particularly true of non-dualistic schools: their emphasis on the non-dual nature of Reality integrate all that the one

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[9] See Moosvi 2002; D'Onofrio 2010; Ernst 2010; Gandhi 2014, 2020a, 2020b; Nair 2020; and Cappello 2021.

[10] Śaṅkara "synthesized the *Advaita-vāda* which had previously existed before him. The academic position of Śaṅkara himself was completely conservative. He advocated that all problems concerning metaphysical knowledge should be referred to the sacred scriptures, which are the final reference" (Nakamura 2004: 678).

and only Reality they recognize embraces into unity.[11] While hierarchies of knowledge, or degrees in spiritual classifications, are asserted within such perspectives, they are so only on the basis of the relative directness or manifestness of the recognition of non-duality. This universal dimension of non-duality is not without its own exclusiveness: it claims for itself a fully consistent and definitive point-of-view—one that could be coined view of no-view or path of no-path.[12] It is what could be called an "inclusive exclusiveness" since the foundation of its exclusiveness is to be found, paradoxically, in the utmost inclusive principle of non-duality. What defines further such doctrines is the recognition that representations cannot fully fathom the depths of Reality and that the Ultimate cannot be grasped, but only be approached, or alluded to, by concepts. Their goal is inner recognition, a cognition that recovers the Reality immanent to consciousness and is actualized through spiritual awakening. In this process, the plurality of perspectives on Reality must be taken into account as a starting point. This is what is entailed, for instance, by the Indian concept of *darśana*, or so-called orthodox perspectives. Although it has been argued that it is relatively recent in its formulation, *ṣaḍdarśana*, the system of six perspectives (Nicholson 2010: 2), is a quite fitting illustration of a unifying pluralistic view of Reality. Whether considered ideologically or historically, the very existence of this plural view is the index of an intuitive sense of the infinite inexhaustibility of Divine Reality. In other words, a non-delimited notion of the Absolute manifests in two ways. First, it leads to recognizing that delimited perspectives are various aspects of the ultimate non-delimitation. Second, it affirms the transcendence of Reality in relation to the respective limitations of the points of view. The popularized Jain symbolic fable of the elephant and the blind men is, in this regard, an excellent illustration of this view of truth. It is an illustration of *anekāntavāda*, the way that "warns against absolutising single aspects of reality" (Barbato 2017: 191).[13]

This essay is a contribution to the study of this ontological and epistemological principle as it applies to the metaphysics of the Ultimate and its "relationship"[14] to "other-than-Itself." It explores two basic levels of consideration and experience of reality, or two truths, articulated in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta and Ghazālī metaphysics of Unity. Thus the focus will be on two examples of "perspectivism" that amount to a recognition of two basic levels of consideration and experience of

[11] This is, for instance, as true with the ninth-century Mahāyāna Huayan (Flower Garland) patriarch Tsung-mi (or Zongmi) (see Gregory 1995) as it is with the tenth/eleventh century Kashmiri Śaivite non-dualist Abhinavagupta (see Dyczkowski 1987).

[12] The first of these paradoxical expressions is Buddhist: "It is the contention of the Mādhyamika that the final release is possible only through Śūnyatā—by giving up of all views, standpoints and predicaments" (Murti 1955: 269). The second one is Hindu: "*Anupāya*—'without means'; way without a way" (Grimes 1996: 42).

[13] "Concerning ontology, *anekāntavāda* states that every object has an infinite number of attributes. Concerning epistemology, it claims that in any one statement or conceptualisation we can only grasp a limited amount of attributes, while other, equally existent aspects are neglected" (Barbato 2017: 3). These two aspects can be referred to as "perspectivism" both in terms of one's apprehension of reality (*nayavāda*) and one's expression of such an apprehension (*syādvāda*).

[14] This word is placed in quotation marks because, as we will see, a strict consideration of the Ultimate precludes, in the doctrines which we will be considering, any real relationships and any otherness.

reality, or in a way "two truths." Pondering such apprehensions of reality is arguably particularly beneficial in our contemporary world. This is not only an academic exercise of analysis of complex and subtle concepts. It is more importantly a potential means of providing ways of addressing the contemporary tensions between relativistic trends and absolutist ideological impulses. In other words, it provides avenues of contemplating the ways in which the position of an absolute Reality can be harmoniously and meaningfully articulated with a pluralistic worldview, or a pluralistic way of living in the world.

Comparative analyses may engage in fruitful parallels and contrasts, sometimes even in "reciprocal illumination," as has been argued by Arvind Sharma, that is as "the claim that one religious tradition helps in understanding another" (2005: 3). The focus herein is not on dogmas, theological concepts, rites, or practices, but on the very principle of speculative mobility that flows from the pluri-perspectival apprehension of Reality characteristic of contemplative metaphysics. The contention is that this principle is the hallmark of those traditions, although it functions in significantly different ways across metaphysical and mystical schools, these differences being largely a function of the respective religious contexts. This way of proceeding may be deemed to take us beyond the usual pale of academic discourse on comparative metaphysics. The latter tends to concentrate on historical considerations of transmissions, assimilation, and transformation. This type of academic focus is a welcome and useful avenue of understanding the ways in which ideas can be rearticulated and transformed in various contexts. It can provide us with important historical and textual tools for understanding how spiritual traditions can intersect, diverge, mingle, and reshape themselves. It also suggests how historical interactions or confluences make it difficult and perilous to oversystematize or essentialize, or even categorize teachings and practices that are often intertwined to the point of being reconfigured.[15] In this study, my approach contemplates matters from a broadly defined phenomenological perspective. This term is used in the acception that Henry Corbin lent to it to define an attention to the religious object "as it has been read and understood by believers, and even more so, by those of high spirituality" (1998: 97).[16] It is in this spirit that this essay follows the general inspiration of contributions such as Toshihiko Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism* (1984) and Reza Shah-Kazemi's *Paths to Transcendence* (2006). It aims at participating in what Izutsu refers to, in the wake of Corbin, as a "meta-historical or transhistorical dialogue,…which is so urgently needed in the present situation of the world" (1984: 2). Izutsu specifies that such comparative studies, when "made in a casual way between two thought-systems which have no historical connection[,]

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[15] Recent studies such as Burchett's *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India* (2019) and Nair's *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia* (2020) have been major contributions to such historical explorations.

[16] "The phenomenological method is exactly that: to hold and unveil consciousness just as it reveals itself in the object it reveals. This object, believed to be visible and perceptible, is only unveiled inasmuch as it is revealed as consciousness of the object. It is *through* this revelation *of* itself, that it is revealed *to* itself" (Corbin 1998: 24–25; emphasis in the original). "The authentic religious *fact* which should be the primary concern of our religious studies, is the Qur'an as it has been read and understood by believers, and even more so, by those of high spirituality" (97; emphasis in the original).

may become superficial observations of resemblances and differences lacking in scientific rigor" (1984: 1). There is therefore need, according to Izutsu, to pay heed to "the fundamental structure of each of the two world-views…as rigorously as possible" (1984: 1) when engaging in comparative studies of this kind. Shah-Kazemi, for his part, makes of transcendence the guiding principle of his comparative inquiries, without which "It is all too easy to mistake the outward phenomena of mysticism for its goal" (2006: xi). These concerns will be guiding our own inquiry. What I wish to demonstrate, in this essay, is how converging ways of focusing on transcendence, as crystallized in the formulations of ultimate non-duality, are articulated with different conceptual emphases within distinct traditional and religious worldviews. On the one hand, the significance of common intuitions does not preclude a careful consideration of the impact of the diversity of contexts. On the other hand, an attention to this diversity does not prevent the perception of the horizon of non-dual transcendence that diverse expressions unveil. Unity is not exclusive of diversity and conversely. It would be as much a mistake to reduce the manifold expressions to a facile formula as it would be shortsighted to miss the significance of the central intuitions of contemplative metaphysics because of a reductively historical and analytic focus.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objective, the essay is structured as follows. It begins with an examination of Ghazālī's doctrine of Unity and his correlative view of creation as "metaphorical." Secondly, we explore how the metaphysics of Unity results, in Ghazālī's meditation, in a view of creatures as having two faces and as being suspended as it were between being and nothingness. This will lead us to examine the meaning of Ghazālī's concept of "metaphorical existence." We will then proceed to delve further into this idea of metaphorical existence to show how it relates to a vision of the universe as comprised of "similitudes." Finally, we will look into some of the epistemological and spiritual implications of Ghazālī's vision of Reality as three layered, involving as it does Reality, symbolic existence, and nothingness. The second section of the essay is devoted to Śaṅkara. We begin with a meditation on Self-knowledge as path to Reality and Unity. We then explore the ways in which this Advaitin view of Reality differs from Ghazālī in its consideration of causality and the implications of this difference. Next, we examine the three levels of Reality that are entailed by Śaṅkarian Advaita—Reality, appearance, and non-reality. This leads us, finally, to focus on the level of appearance, or transactional reality, and assess the ways in which it functions as a path to the Absolute. The final section of the essay looks at the most significant elements of comparison between Ghazālī's and Śaṅkara's respective views of empirical existence and Reality. We conclude with reflections on the ways the latter function, in each perspective, as means of realization of the Absolute.

Setting the Stage

Islam and Hinduism, as it has been often argued, are both diametrically different on the levels of theological conceptualization and ritual life and arguably converging in their ultimate metaphysical foundations. The first point needs not be rehearsed. It

offers sharp and conventional contrasts, if not oppositions, between polytheism and theological monotheism, diversity of ways and uniformity of worship, group specific identity and integrity and proselytizing universality, among others. The second character is less often envisaged. It pertains to a fully consistent emphasis on "unitarian" or non-dual foundations, most evidently so in mystical and contemplative traditions such as "gnostic" Ṣūfīsm and the schools of Advaita. It is on this level that the question of vantage points, and the shifting consideration of their impact on the ontological status of phenomena, is most relevant. Within Islam, the choice to focus on Ghazālī in this essay flows from the recognition that he who has been called "proof of Islam" (ḥujjat al-islām) is rooted in the mainstream tradition. It is also founded on the relevance of his mystical insights. The metaphysical substance of some of his writings is arguably representative of the highest and most daring reaches of non-dualism in Islam. As a Muslim theologian and mystic, Ghazālī contemplates matters from the point of view of the creature in its relation to God. After all, *islām* means surrender, or submission, to the will of God, and the latter is only meaningful from the point of view of the creature. Significantly the word that defines the religion of Islam does not refer to God Himself, but to creatures as they relate to Him. What is typical of the Ṣūfī understanding of this relationship is that it tends to move away from a mere consideration of worship to one of ontological dependence, from will to being.[17] In other words, the word *islām* can and must be understood on a religious, devotional, and legal level, as well as on an ontological level, the latter being the metaphysical foundation of the former. The Islamic metaphysics of *tawḥīd*, or Divine Unity and Unification, flows from a meditation upon the fundamental underpinnings of the relationship between the servant and the Lord and the utter contingency of the former in relation to the latter.

Ghazālī, Islam, and the Metaphysics of Unity

Ghazālī's opus is extremely diverse, this diversity being a function of the mediating character of his work, which encompasses matters of legal injunctions and practices as well as Ṣūfī metaphysics. In this considerable work, *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights) stands as a towering treatise, the metaphysical statements of which make of Ghazālī a peer, and indeed a precursor, of Abū Bakr Muḥammad Muhyīddīn ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240) or the Persian Ṣūfī Mahmūd Shabestarī (1288–1340), author of the poetic classic *Gulshan-i Rāz* (The Secret Rose Garden).[18] The context and occasion for the work are Qurʾānic. It is a commentary on the Verse of

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[17] I write "it tends" in awareness of the fact that much of the history of *taṣawwuf* (Ṣūfīsm) can be understood, in fact, as an interiorization, and in a way an intensification, of what lies in seeds in the implications of attitudes and virtues flowing from Qurʾānic injunctions. See Massignon (1997), which is entirely devoted to the task of elucidating this interiorization of the Qurʾānic vocabulary.

[18] The "unicity of Being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), a term which has been used to refer to Ibn ʿArabī's view but was not coined by him, teaches the essential unity of all existents, God, or *wujūd*, being the only Reality. To our knowledge, there has not been any sustained study of the relationship between Ghazālī's *Mishkāt* and Ibn ʿArabī's school of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. On Ibn ʿArabī, see Chittick 1989. For Ibn ʿArabī's influence in India, see Stavig 2009.

Light written in response to the request of a disciple.[19] It develops a meditation on the nature of Light that follows the symbolic analogies of light from a contemplation of the metaphysical meaning of the Name of God *an-Nūr*, the Light, to a consideration of the physical light. Light is primarily understood by Ghazālī as the principle of manifestation, without which the world of creation would have no reality, or rather no appearance of reality. Nothing can "appear" without light.[20] Analogically, everything is dependent upon God as Light, and this ontological contingency is the fundamental metaphysical principle of Islam. On an anthropological level, this principle of dependence translates into the two dimensions of mankind in Islam: servanthood (*'ubūdiyyah*) and vicegerency (*khilāfa*), the latter being dependent upon the former. As Sachiko Murata puts it: "Servanthood and vicegerency are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, servanthood has a certain priority over vicegerency.…Until human beings submit to the will of God (*islām*) and become His servants, they cannot be His proper representatives" (1992: 16). This definition of the human highlights the ambivalent nature of creatures, which are undoubtedly considered to be existent, since the very message of the religion addresses them, while their status as *mawjūdāt*, or existents, is to be distinguished from the mode of being of God Himself. In fact, Ghazālī bases his whole meditation on the verse "Everything is perishing except His face." The English verb "perish" translates *hālika* (Qur'ān 28:88), which he renders metaphysically by "Nothing exists but God and His face" (*Lā mawjūd ill'Allāh ta'ālā wa wajhuhu*) (Buchman 1998: 17).[21]

The Two Faces of Creatures

The statement "Nothing exists but God and His face," if it is to be taken seriously in its ultimate metaphysical implications, cannot but mean that the mode of being of God is fundamentally different from that of creatures. God is unequivocally being, while the ontological status of creature is as it were suspended between being and

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[19] "God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it—light upon light—God guides whoever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything" (24:35; Abdel Haleem 2005: 223).

[20] As a consequence, like many Ṣūfīs, Ghazālī does not simply consider creation as taking place at a definite point in time, but also, and above all, as a constant recreation, or rather an ontological dependence upon God's act of creation at every instant. For penetrating analyses of the Ṣūfī doctrine of recreation at each instant, see Izutsu 1994.

[21] Is there a difference, in this respect, between God and His Face? No, the two expressions refer to the Essence as such. Moreover, Ghazālī makes use of the concept of Face, which has been theologically identified with the Essence of God, to refer to realities in general—including creatures. Besides the debated question of the potential anthropomorphism of the word "face" as applied to God, it is important to recognize that the Arabic word does not only convey the meaning of a person's physical face, but also denotes, in different contexts, the spatial direction, or even the future condition of a thing, as well as the social status and power of a person. This is no doubt the reason why the face of God has been traditionally identified in Islam with His Essence, even though the physical suggestions of the term might lead one to understand it as referring to the relational and relatable aspect of God only. Face does not seem to imply herein, therefore, any sense of relativity within the Divine. It simply denotes the Divine by contrast with, or by discrimination with, the universal realm of existents that "perish."

non-being. Thus, in Ghazālī's view, each creature is endowed with two faces, one turned toward God, the other toward itself. In Arabic the word face, *wajh*, may refer to the countenance of a person, but also to the facing direction, and even to status and power. This is buttressed, grammatically, by the fact that occurrences of the word *wajh* are followed, in Ghazālī's *Mishkāt*, by the preposition *ilā*, which indicates a vis-à-vis, a direction, a respect, a regard. Nevertheless, this means that the creature can be considered from two radically different points of view, without this difference affecting its unity and integrity *qua* creature. Ghazālī refers to a face turned toward oneself, and another turned toward God: "Each thing has two faces: a face toward itself, and a face toward its Lord" (Buchman 1998: 17). Referring to two faces is a way to suggest that these two aspects or respects cannot be contemplated at the same time or from the same vantage point. Moreover, a face does not only refer to what can be seen, as when all I can see from others is their face. It also denotes a facing, hence a gaze turned toward others. In this case the face is an act of contemplation, and this remark holds important consideration from a spiritual point of view. It suggests that the human creature, being endowed with the freewill to look in two different directions, holds responsibility, and even power, over its own ontological status. Ghazālī, commenting on the Qur'ānic statement "Whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God" specifies that "'god' [*al-ilāh*] is an expression for that toward which a face turns through worship and becoming godlike" (Buchman 1998: 20). The expression "becoming godlike," literally "becoming divine" (*ta'alah*), crystallizes strikingly the ontological transformation that is at stake. Face is therefore to be understood in an interior, or spiritual, sense. Ghazālī refers, in this connection, to "the faces of the hearts" (*wujūh al-qulūb*). The face of the creature can also be understood as that aspect of the creature that is in relation to the Face of God, its archetype in God. This is the creatural possibility which is actualized by the Divine *kun*—let it be, the Divine *fiat*. Here, becoming is nothing else that becoming what one is in God, or in God's creative intention.

Between All and Nothing

This leads us to the crux of the metaphysical matter when considering that, for Ghazālī, human beings who have, among "things," an active capacity to turn toward their Creator are *mawjūdāt*, existents, only with regard to their face turned toward God. For this reason, concerning the existent, Ghazālī states that "viewed in terms of the face of God, it exists" (*bi'tibār wajhu Allāh ta'ālā mawjūd*), but also that "viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent" (*fa-huwa bi 'tibār wajhu nafsahu 'adam*) (Buchman 1998: 17). This non-existence is even translated in terms of essence: "when the essence [*dhāt*] of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer nonexistence" (*idhā i'tubir dhātahu min haythu dhātahu fa-huwa 'adam maḥḍ*) (Buchman 1998: 16). In other words, the "thing" has no essence, no selfhood independently from God.[22] Ghazālī denies the least identity, or what Hindus and Buddhists would call the least self-nature (*svabhāva*), to the

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[22] Buchman translates literally *'adam maḥḍ* by "sheer nonexistence," it could also be rendered as "outright nonentity" to emphasize that the essence of the thing is in no way "something" when taken in itself.

creature when it is "abstracted" from the Creator. The reference to Creator, creation, and creature might even be misleading here, if it is understood, conventionally or narratively, as an antecedent Divine Act situated in time. Existence is received, but Ghazālī highlights a crucial point: it is not only that the thing received it *in illo tempore*; it is receiving it at each instant, which means that it is at every moment both something and nothing depending upon the vantage point. What is implicit therein is that, among creatures, only human beings—with the possible additional exception of *jinn*, have the intellectual capacity and the free will needed for being able to consider reality from a variety of standpoints. Nevertheless, what this human ability to make every instant a door onto eternity means is that Resurrection is not primarily, for gnostics, a temporal and eschatological reality, but an evident metaphysical reality that derives from the status of the creature.[23] There is an ontological reckoning, as it were, that is inscribed in the very nature of the human being.

Metaphorical Existence

A question must be raised at this juncture: since we have seen that, for Ghazālī, it is only through and in relation to God that a thing is existent, what can be the ontological status of the thing thereby considered? This status can in no way be identical to that of God, but it cannot be nothing either. The creature is a *mawjūd*, an existent, only "inasmuch as it is ascribed to another" (Buchman 1998: 16), this "other" being God. Hence, the existence of this existent is not true *wujūd*, true existence: *laysa bi-wujūd haqīqī*, "it is not being in truth." *Wujūd* belongs truly to God, and to God only. What kind of existence is the existence of the thing, then? Its mode of existence is referred to by Ghazālī as a metaphorical reality, from the Arabic *majāz*, metaphor. The term also denotes the meaning of passage or way, and we need to delve briefly into the cosmological implications of this connotation given their spiritual significance. The Greek word *metaphorá*, not unlike the Arabic *majāz*, does indeed entail the idea of a transport or a transfer. This can be understood, on a metaphysical level, as meaning that the reality that is "transported" from God to the thing does not truly belong to the thing itself, in the same way as the metaphor is not truly the reality referred to. Secondly, though, the term metaphorical can also allude to the opposite, or complementary, transport from the creature to God. This is the respect in which things point to God, or refer to Him as their source, or even more accurately as their real being. This second connotation is not the one Ghazālī has primarily in mind when he discusses metaphysics, as we will develop further, but it is central in his cosmological and spiritual considerations.

In Ghazālī's vocabulary, the two terms used to refer to "metaphorical reality" are *majāz* and *mithāl* (parable or similitude) in the plural *amthāl*. Now, the denotations and connotations of the two words are quite different. In a way, the first one pertains to the unreal aspect of "other-than-God," while the second one indicates its real side, or the side of it that makes it participant into Reality. What is at stake in *majāz*

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[23] "The gnostics do not need the day of resurrection [*yawm al-qiyāmat*] to hear the Fashioner [*al-Bārī*] proclaim, 'Whose is the Kingdom today? God's, the One, the Overwhelming'" (Buchman 1998: 17).

is a "going beyond," alluding thereby to the point that its actual reality is not what it appears to be.[24] In Book 35 of his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revivification of Religious Sciences), *Kitāb at-Tawḥīd wa-t-tawakkul* (Divine Unity and Trust in God), Ghazālī distinguishes the "one who brings everything back to God," whom he characterizes as a *muḥaqqiq*, or a "realizer of the truth," from the one who "brings everything back to other than God," whom he identifies as a *mutajawwaz*, from the same root as *majāz*, one who exaggerates and whose words pertain to *majāz*.[25] Further on in the same treatise, referring to the four kinds of affirmation of Unity— the four ways[26] to bear witness to, or rather to live, the first *shahādah*, Ghazālī states that the one who recognizes God as the only true Agent legitimately charges the linguist with assigning to other than God the name of agent as a metaphor, *majāz*. Indeed, the term becomes here a quasi-synonym of *shirk*, or "association," the greatest sin in Islam. To associate somebody or something to God is to betray monotheism. Here, however, it is not only an association in worship, like in worshiping a *mūrti*, an "idol," but one in being, to assign being to another than God. In this very connection, Ghazālī refers to a *ḥadīth* included in Bukhārī: "is not everything other than God vain" (*alā kulli shay mā khalā Allāh bātil*)? For Ghazālī the one who "exaggerates" is also a *mukhtari'*, an "inventor," since he makes something out of nothing by assigning reality to that which is not, thereby ignoring that there is no "agent but God," *lā fā'il ill'Allāh*. So, it is quite clear that the terms associated with *majāz* as metaphor are negatively connoted and refer to a lack of being.

Metaphor as Similitude

Now, let us turn, by contrast, to the concept of *mithāl* in Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights). This analysis will shed light on how Ghazālī intends all the existence as a meaningful metaphor. By contrast with *majāz*, a word that exegetes of the Qur'ān have often used to refer to the figurative language of scripture, the terms *mithāl* and *amthāl* are widely used in the Qur'ān itself.[27] They are particularly present in the context of the ways in which God "strikes similitudes," or parables, to teach human beings. One of the most significant occurrences of such a statement is

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[24] "The term *majāz*,…usually translated as 'trope,'…is explained as…'to go beyond something,' in the sense of a participle denoting *al-kalimatu al-jā'izatu 'ay al-muta'addiyatu makānahā l-'aṣliyya* 'a word that goes beyond its original place (i.e. its literal meaning in the language system)' (cf. Jurjānī, *'Asrār* 365; Mehren 1853:75)" (Simon 2011).

[25] Here, exaggeration may refer to a lack of adequation to reality, hence a semblance of reality (see Boutaleb 2002: 76).

[26] These are: (1) the way of the "hypocrite" who is content to affirm Divine Unity with the tongue, (2) the path of the commonality of the believers who have faith in Divine Unity but need the rational arguments of theology to buttress or sustain their faith, (3) the way of the one who perceives God as the only true Agent, and finally (4) the way of the one who contemplates God as the only Reality.

[27] "Al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* is a book that includes both a methodology for Qur'ānic interpretation and al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the Light Verse of the Qur'ān. Al-Ghazālī calls the methodology 'the secret and method of creating similitudes (*sirr al-tamthīl wa minhājihi*)' or 'the method of striking similitudes (*minhāj ḍarb al-mithāl*).' The phrase *ḍarb al-mathal* or *ḍarb al-amthāl* is used twenty-seven times in various forms in the Qur'ān—mostly to describe the analogies and parables created by God to explain things to mankind" (Sands 2006: 37).

to be found in the Verse of Light itself—which dwells at the center of the *Mishkāt*'s metaphysical exposition, when it is stated that "God strikes similitudes for people" (*wa yadribu Allāh al-amthāl li-n-nās*) (Qur'ān 24:35). As a result, the concept of *mithāl* has been central in much of Ṣūfī exegesis, where it refers not only to symbolic language, but also, and above all, to a qualitative cosmology that contemplates the universe as comprised of onto-cosmic degrees which unfold Divine Qualities downward. Ghazālī echoes this vision in his *Mishkāt*, all the more so that the idea of *mithāl* is explicitly present in the Verse of Light that serves as point of departure for his whole metaphysical development on similitudes. While the Qur'ān mentions that God strikes *amthāl*,[28] the world of *amthāl*, or *'ālam al-mithāl* as Ṣūfīs refer to it, evokes more than a mere Divine pedagogy. It indicates realities that have by virtue of their qualities the capacity to reflect the Divine realm, and also to provide means or paths of return to It. When God strikes *amthāl* he does not simply designs pedagogical symbols, He creates, or manifests, beings that are actual signs of His Being and His Qualities. He manifests Himself as *al-ẓāhir*, the Outward. Thus, Ghazālī formulates the law of analogy that presides over the relationships between the various degrees of reality and stretches the expanse of the similitudes of the universe: "The divine mercy made the visible world parallel to the world of dominion; there is nothing in this world that is not a similitude of something in the world of dominion" (Buchman 1998: 27). This is the epistemological sense of "traversing" that lies at the core of the Ṣūfī perspective. It is focused on the world as symbol, which is the very reflection of Unity within the multiplicity, and through which the latter participates, therefore, in the former.[29]

The "world of the kingdom" (*'ālam al-mulk*) and the "world of the dominion" (*'ālam al-malakūt*) refer to two domains of reality that have been defined and articulated in slightly different ways in Ṣūfī cosmology. Ghazālī, for his part, contemplates the "world of the kingdom," that is the "visible world," the "world of witnessing," *'ālam al-shahādah*, that is to say the world that "bears witness" to the Reality and the Qualities of God in a manifest fashion. It coincides by and large with what the Qur'ān characterizes as the "signs" of God, *āyāt*. As for "the world of the dominion," it is equated by Ghazālī with *'ālam al-ghayb*, the world of the "unseen," or better the world of the hidden and the Divine Mystery (Buchman 1998: 25–27). A point needs to be stressed, however, with respect to the hiddenness of this world: it is not that it is intrinsically unseen or mysterious, it is simply that it is "concealed from the majority" (*ghāhib min al-aktharīn*). When unveiled, or when human intelligence has been fully actualized and become aware of the integral meaning of the *āyāt*, the symbolic cosmos is experienced as a means of ascension toward the world of dominion. Thus, Ghazālī indicates that "the sensory world [*'ālam al-ḥiss*]

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[28] English translations tend to favor "parables" as a rendering of this Arabic term, but similitude might be a better translation as it highlights the aspect of analogy (or *tashbīh*) that is central in this regard. The word "parable" suggests a teachings method and is therefore most often understood as a way for God to instruct mankind about Himself.

[29] As Moad puts it: "the 'kingdom' and the 'dominion' are parallel to the extent that everything in the former is a similitude of something in the latter. In that case, the entirety of the sensible world is a sign, and in a sense to which we have already alluded, also a 'veil.' The epistemological aspect of 'crossing over,' then, is a reading of signs and an unveiling" (2007: 172).

is [in some way] a ladder [*mirqāt*] to the rational world [*'ālam al-'aqlī*]" (Buchman 1998: 26). If it were not the case, claims Ghazālī, there would not be any access to the presence (*haẓrat*) and nearness to God, *al-qurb*. Let us note, incidentally, that the translation of the Arabic "*'ālam al-'aqlī*" by "rational world" falls short, arguably, of the most significant implications of Ghazālī's "intelligible world," which is not only rational, in a sense that would merely refer to the faculty of discursive intelligence, but is also and first of all, in conformity with the etymological meaning of *'aql*, a reality that "binds" one to the Divine.[30] The highest reaches of the *'aqlī* world evoke, therefore, the realm of Platonic Ideas or Forms.[31] With regard to Platonic Ideas, we see furthermore that *'ālam al-'aqlī* pertains to contemplation rather to ratiocination. In this contemplative vein, we must remember that Ghazālī teaches that "the visible world (*'ālam al-shahādah*) is a ladder to the world of dominion (*'ālam al-malakūt*)." For Ghazālī, this ladder is what makes it possible for the path of religion to be "traveled," a standard Ṣūfī symbol for spiritual awakening and transformation. Ghazālī specifies that the exploration of analogies or similitudes requires a consideration of the totality of existence in both worlds (*jamī' mawjūdāt al-'ālamīn*). This is because the existents participate in the universal network of analogies that form the entire universe of meaning, thereby reflecting Divine Unity and intelligible purpose or even being since there is none other than the Real.

The Intermediary World

Now, let us turn to other works by Ghazālī which focus not on two but on three ontological levels.[32] Thus, at times, Ghazālī refers explicitly to a third realm: *'ālam al-jabarūt*, "the world of Power or Almightiness."[33] This world mediates between *al-mulk* and *al-malakūt*. Thus, in the *Kitāb at-Tawḥīd*, Ghazālī states that

> this world (of the *jabarūt*) is midway between the world of (material) Dominion and (sensual) Perception and the world of *al-malakūt*, since the world of (material) Dominion is easier to traverse, while the intelligible world is more difficult to traverse. Standing between the earthly and intelligible worlds, the world of Almightiness resembles a ship moving between water and land: it is not as turbulent as being in the water and yet not as secure as being on land (Gianotti 2001: 152–53).

Aside from the intermediary status of the *jabarūt*, we must note the moving capacity that is associated to it through the symbol of the ship that allows for

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[30] "The Arabic word for intellect *al-'aql* is related to the word 'to bind,' for it is that which binds man to his Origin" (Nasr 1989: 12).

[31] "The Platonic view which sees knowledge descending from the realm of the 'ideas' to the world, or from the Principle to manifestation, is more akin to the sapiential perspective than the Aristotelian one which moves from manifestation to the Principle or from physics to metaphysics" (Nasr 1989: 155n4).

[32] Notably in the *Kitāb at-Tawḥīd wa-t-tawakkul* of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* and *al-Imlā' 'alā ishkālāt al-iḥyā'* (The Response to Questions about the Revivification), which is included as an appendix in the form of a reply in some editions of the *Iḥyā'*.

[33] The first rendering is Burrell's (2001). The second one is Gianotti's (2001).

stable traveling.[34] *Al-jabarūt* is an intermediary world (Wensinck 1940: 85–86), identifiable to *'ālam al-mithāl*, which mediates between the sensory world and the world of dominion. Corbin has commented extensively on this realm of reality, which he refers to as the "imaginal world," or *mundus imaginalis*.[35] This is the realm of *amthāl*, the realm of similitude, or the intermediary domain that makes it possible for the spiritual to be translated into a reality that is assimilable within the terrestrial world. It provides a bridge, or as Ghazālī puts it, a "ladder," for one's ascension toward the world of the Spirit.

Three Degrees of Being

What precedes indicates that there are, in Ghazālī's view, three ontological degrees of reality, or rather three degrees of consideration,[36] or three perspectives on reality. First, there is the Divine Essence itself, which is "everything," since there is none other than God: "He is everything" (*Huwa al-kullu*) (Buchman 1998: 20). This is the simplest and most direct affirmation of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or the "unicity of existence."[37] This Qurānically grounded non-dualism is based on the most literal, radical, and metaphysically consistent reading of the verse "Everything perishes but the Face of God" (Qur'ān 28:88). In the absence of such a radical and inclusive reduction to Unity, we are left with an incomplete *tawḥīd*, which Corbin identified as the "paradox of monotheism."[38] This is what happens when one does not recognize the nothingness of the creature in itself, which is but the other side of the unicity of *wujūd*, or Being.

Secondly, there is the creature inasmuch as it is in relation to God, or contemplated from the vantage point of its having its ontological roots in God. From

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[34] Gianotti has related this aspect to the central nexus of mystical journey and cosmology.

[35] Corbin coined the adjective "imaginal"—in contradistinction with imaginary—to highlight the actual reality of a domain that mediates, ontologically, between the supra-formal world of the Divine and that of creaturely manifestation: "I will make an immediate admission. The choice of these two words was imposed upon me some time ago, because it was impossible for me, in what I had to translate or say, to be satisfied with the word *imaginary*. This is by no means a criticism addressed to those of us for whom the use of the language constrains recourse to this word, since we are trying together to reevaluate it in a positive sense.…I was absolutely obliged to find another term because, for many years, I have been by vocation and profession an interpreter of Arabic and Persian texts, the purposes of which I would certainly have betrayed if I had been entirely and simply content—even with every possible precaution— with the term *imaginary*. I was absolutely obliged to find another term if I did not want to mislead the Western reader that it is a matter of uprooting long-established habits of thought, in order to awaken him to an order of things" (1995: 1–2; emphasis in the original).

[36] The Arabic term *bi'tibār* can be literally translated by "in consideration of."

[37] Even though this metaphysical position is associated with the school germinated from the ideas of Muhyīddīn ibn 'Arabī, its underpinnings have been more or less explicitly at work before Ibn 'Arabī and the works of Ghazālī, although the latter are normally not associated with the Akbarī school, and generally held to be more "normative" than those of the Shaykh al-Akbar.

[38] This is the situation in which the Deity is merely understood as a Supreme Being, an *Ens Supremum*. Corbin (1976) refers to the "metaphysical idolatry" inherent to this position: "The immanent danger, present already in the first instance of the paradox of monotheism, is to make of God not a pure Act of being, the One-being, but an *Ens*, an existent being (*mawjūd*), infinitely above all the other existents. Since it is already constituted as existent being, the distance that one attempts to establish between *Ens supremum* and the *entia creata* only aggravates its condition of *Ens supremum* as that of an existent being."

this point of view, the creature must be recognized as being an existent, it is indeed a *mawjūd*: "viewed in terms of the face of God, it (the thing) exists" (*bi 'tibār wajh-Allāh ta'ālā mawjūd*) (Buchman 1998: 17–18). This consideration is, in a sense, the most enigmatic because it raises the question of the ontological status of this existent situated "somewhere" between the pure *wujūdiyah*, or "beingness," of God and "nothingness." The metaphorical aspect of this level of existence leaves us, as already suggested, with an ambiguity, since it can be understood as a lack of being or as a transfer of being. It is the aspect of lack of being that leads David Buchman to translate *majāz* by "unreal" in the context of the spiritual ascent toward "the highlands of reality."[39] As for the aspect of "transfer of being," it is clearly intimated by the notions of similitude, analogy, and parable that allude, in various ways, to corresponding degrees of "being," rather than to the absence thereof.

Thirdly, the creature can be considered in relation to itself, with respect to its own "face," its own " selfhood." The outcome of this consideration is, for Ghazālī, quite clear: "Viewed in terms of the face of itself, it [the 'thing'] is nonexistent" (*bi'tibār wajh-nafsahu 'adam*) (Buchman 1998: 17–18). This is the aspect of non-reality of other-than-God. The word *'adam* is the antonym of *wujūd*, and it simply means lack or absence of being. The difficulty with this idea of the non-existence of "things" is that it appears to contradict the conventional notion of existence. How could a thing, a creature, be considered non-existent? It is obviously not the phenomenal dimension of the thing that is called into doubt herein, but rather something that comes close to what Hindus and Buddhists would refer to as *svabhāva*, or "self-nature." It is quite significant, in this regard, that Ghazālī's expression, "*nafsahu*"— literally "its self," literally echoes the Sanskrit *sva-*, both referring to the "reflexive" aspect of things, or reality as their "own." The Sanskrit word "*bhava*" denoting, as for it, being, but also origin, in another echo to Ghazālī's point that the non-existence of "things" means that they do not have their origin in themselves, being purely relative. It is so that Ghazālī envisages a thing that "has existence from another, its existence [being] borrowed and [having] no support in itself" (Buchman 1998: 16).

One of the main reflections we may draw from this summary three-layered ontology is that the second level is clearly distinct herein from the first and the third ones in the sense that it is a point of junction, or an isthmus—what the Islamic tradition refers to as a *barzakh*, between reality and non-reality. The mode of being of the thing in relation to God is to be and not to be at the same time. This applies both to being or existence and to selfhood or essence: "Nothing possesses a 'he-ness' other than He, except in a metaphorical sense" (*Lā huwiyat li-ghayrihi illā bi-l-majāz*) (Buchman 1998: 20). The creature is—and it has, a selfhood, *qua* God since God is its true being, and it is not—and has no self, since only God is in a real sense. So, the way the thing is a *mawjūd* and a *huwiyah* implies a "nonexistent

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[39] "From here the gnostics climb from the lowlands of metaphor to the highlands of reality, and they perfect their ascent. Then they see—witnessing with their own eyes—that there is none in existence save God and that 'Everything is perishing except His face' (28:88).…Each thing has two faces: a face toward itself, and a face toward its Lord. Viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent; but viewed in terms of the face of God, it exists" (*Lā mawjūd ill'Allāh ta'ālā wa wajhuhu*) (Buchman 1998: 17).

existence."[40] This is the ambiguous, metaphorical, ontological status of the world which is—inasmuch as it is none other than He, and is not—inasmuch as it is not He. In Ṣūfīsm, therefore, the world of relativity is primarily envisaged as a field of manifestation or revelation of God—indeed as God's "appearance," through the metaphorical reality of the world, while being conjointly nothing in itself.

Reality and Self-Knowledge in Śaṅkarian Advaita

The question of what is truly real lies also at the heart of Advaita Vedānta. Among the various schools of understanding and commentary of the Vedas, or Vedānta, Advaita Vedānta is characterized by its non-dualistic interpretation of scriptures. While both Śaṅkara's Advaita and Ghazālī's Ṣūfīsm share a central concern for the Real, it could be argued that Śaṅkarian Advaita is more epistemological in scope, at least *a priori*, than is Ghazālī's onto-cosmology. Advaita centers on the true Self that is to be recognized and realized, while Ghazālī contemplates Divine Being as it both extinguishes and animates everything seemingly other-than-Itself, but also as it unfolds the degrees of being that stretch its infinite power in order to mirror Itself in its creation and provides humankind with theophanic means of spiritual ascent. The question of being is therefore intrinsically connected, with Śaṅkara, with identifying that which prevents one from realizing the *ātman*, the one and only Divine Self of all selves. Now "that" is an epistemological error, a false attribution, a misidentification, a superimposition. In Advaita Vedānta, the immediate emphasis lies on the illusory aspect of the very principle of error: *māyā*. It is true that *māyā* is also approached from an ontological and cosmogonic vantage point, but this is primarily in consideration of scriptures, and from the perspective of the religious narrative rather than in reference to the overarching goal of existence. All the same, even though it is indeed the very principle of error, *māyā* is not unreal, and therefore the question is to know what use one may make of it—if any, in terms of reaching, or rather realizing, the Absolute. Such an evaluation, however, can only be reached on the basis of a clear understanding of the nature of Reality itself, and in relation to it.

The Question of Causality

What defines, or at least characterizes, Reality? In this regard, one major difference between Ghazālī's Ṣūfīsm and the metaphysical language of Śaṅkarian Advaita revolves around the question of causation, or causality, and its relation to Reality.

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[40] In the same vein, Ibn ʿArabī claims that most religious perceptions of the Real pertains to this metaphorical ontology, which he identifies as "imagination." For him, imagination is the *barzakh* of the Breath of the All-merciful, which is the creative principle. In Chittick's words, it is the "'isthmus' between two realities, Nondelimited Being and the nonexistent things" (1989: 181). It is "neither Being nor nothingness; it is imagination, which is He/not He" (182). It is "the ontological locus for *tashbīh*" between the Real and the world of creation (181). *Tashbīh*, which connotes resemblance, is the principle of analogy that "relates" relative existents with the Non-delimited, and therefore indeed Unrelatable, Reality. Thus, the connection between the delimited and the non-delimited is a highly paradoxical, rationally unresolvable, matter. Ibn ʿArabī sees *tashbīh* as the complement of *tanzīh*, "abstraction" or "transcendence," which emphasizes the discontinuity between the world and God.

Ghazālī, like most other Ṣūfīs, remains within the framework of a theology, or a metaphysics, of causation based on Qur'ānic grounds: Reality is the First Cause, or the Creator. For his part, by contrast, Śaṅkara makes it clear that causation is ultimately moot from the highest point of view, and is not, in fact, the ultimate meaning of scriptures. All narratives of causation and creation point to non-duality, but they do so in the language of duality: "We, moreover, understand that by means of comparisons, such as that of the clay, the creation is described merely for the purpose of teaching us that the effect is not really different from the cause" (*Brahmasūtras* 4.1; Rangaswami 2012: 254). This is the non-dual background of apparently dualistic teachings based on a causal narrative. While Ghazālī, as we have seen, does not shun from asserting the exclusive, and inclusive, sole reality of God, he does not for that eliminate the language of creation, nor does he refer to it, as Śaṅkara does, as to a lower pedagogical intent.[41]

A first text to consider for understanding Śaṅkara's view of causality in relation to Reality is his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and more specifically the commentary of 2:16:

> It is found that the unreal [*asat*] has no being [*bhava*];
> It is found that there is no non-being [*abhāva*] of the real [*sat*].
> The certainty of both these propositions is indeed surely seen
> By the perceivers of truth [*tattva*] (Sargeant 2009: 101).

Śaṅkara comments upon this central passage by emphasizing that realities that are effects and subject to change cannot be fully real (*vastu-sat*). In order to do so, Śaṅkara approaches the matter from a point of view that would seem to evoke the Buddhist critique of causality. The gist of his argument is that every effect and every cause must be taken to be unreal. It is so to the extent that "it [the effect] is not perceived as distinct from its cause" and "it is not perceived before its production and after its destruction" (Rangaswami 2012: 132). There is no effect without cause, no pot without clay, which means that the pot cannot be fully real. The temporariness of the effect, the fact that it is not before its beginning, and is no more after its destruction, points to its lack of reality.[42] As for the cause, it is also unreal "because it is not perceived apart from its [own] cause" (Sastry 1977: 34). In other words, the pot is not real firstly because it is not perceived apart from clay, secondly because it has a beginning and an end, and thirdly because the clay itself is dependent on its own cause. We have therefore a network of co-relationality and impermanence that excludes full reality. Now the objection presented to this argument through causality appears to equate Śaṅkara's position with Buddhist Śūnyavāda: "Then it comes to this: nothing at all exists."

The answer to this objection is crucial to Śaṅkara's understanding of Reality as it defines two aspects of cognitive experience, one being real (*sat*) and the other unreal (*asat*). This means that the same phenomenal experience has two distinguishable

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[41] On this point see Treiger 2007.

[42] "That which is non-existent at the beginning and in the end, is necessarily so (non-existent) in the middle. The objects we see are illusions, still they are regarded as if real" (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 4.31; Nikhilānanda 1949: 264).

sides, one real and one unreal, both dependent on the nature of consciousness. There is, on the one hand, the consciousness of the limited phenomenon as such, like pot, and, on the other hand, the consciousness of the pot as existent. The consciousness of pot is temporary whereas the consciousness of existence is not. In other words, the pot is unreal inasmuch as we are conscious of it as pot—for all of the reasons that have been spelled out previously, but it is real inasmuch as we are conscious of it as existent. This is because consciousness is not affected by the limitations that have been mentioned. The consciousness of pot is dependent on the consciousness of existence, but the latter is not dependent upon the former. This corresponds to the distinction between the attributive or the adjective (*viśeṣaṇa*), here "existent," and the substantive (*viśeṣya*), here "pot." Thus, every phenomenon inasmuch as it is a content of consciousness is both real and unreal. It is unreal when taken in itself and real when taken as consciousness of being or consciousness and being. In a way, this distinction would seem to parallel, functionally at least, Ghazālī's consideration of the respect in which the reality of creatures is contemplated—that is with regard to God or with regard to themselves. In other words, the function of Consciousness in Śaṅkara would correspond to that of the consideration of the relation to God in Ghazālī.[43]

Three Levels of Reality

In actuality, however, Advaita generally distinguishes between at least three, and not only two, degrees of reality, or rather "levels of being."[44] Eliot Deutsch refers to these three levels as Reality, Appearance, and Unreality. These terms correspond, in the technical lexicon of Advaita, to the Sanskrit terms *pāramārthika* for the first, *vyāvahārika* or *prātibhāsika* for the second, and *tuchchha* for the third (Deutsch 1980: 26).

Prātibhāsika is most often used to refer to that which is apparently or subjectively real, like in a dream, by contrast with *vyāvahārika*, which would be empirically and objectively real, like the interactions of daily life. The two have in common not to be fully real—from a metaphysical point of view, but Śaṅkarācārya still clearly distinguishes between the two with regard to the nature of the respective experiences. This appears clearly from Śaṅkara's meditation on Gauḍapāda's commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*.[45] It has been debated whether Gauḍapāda does distinguish between *vyāvahārika* and *prātibhāsika* or not (Balasubramanian 2002: 450), but at any rate we read in his *Kārikā* that "The thoughtful persons speak of the sameness of the waking and dream states on account of similarity of objects (perceived in both the states) on grounds already described" (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 2.5; Nikhilānanda 1949: 96). Śaṅkara comments on this passage by stating that the apparent identification of the two states by Gauḍapāda is "associated with subject-object relationship" (Nikhilānanda 1949: 96). The two are not distinguished in

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[43] It is important, however, to emphasize that the two Sanskrit terms *sat* and *asat*, when translated by "real" and "unreal," may become the source of some confusion. *Sat* is ordinarily translated as "being," and *asat*, as its privative, should therefore rigorously be translated as "deprived of being" or "non-being."

[44] This is the expression used by Deutsch 1980: 15.

[45] Gauḍapāda lived in the sixth century CE. He is the author of the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, or verse commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, one of the most concise and influential Upaniṣads.

Gauḍapāda's statement because they both refer to the domain of subject-object consciousness, but they are, from another point of view, quite distinguishable, since one involves experiential objectivity while the other is merely subjective, that is, a production of the subject.

Before we turn our attention to *vyāvahārika*, as it arguably provides us with the richest comparative material in regard to Ghazālī's view of reality, it must be stressed that Deutsch's second level of being is to be sharply differentiated from the third, *tuchchha*, the "unreal." *Tuchchha* denotes literally "empty," "void," "insignificant," and "lowly." The difference between both *vyāvahārika* and *prātibhāsika*, on the one hand, and *tuchchha*, on the other hand, lies in that the latter refers to something self-contradictory. It cannot therefore be an object of experience, such as the standard "barren mother" and "hare's horn."[46] By contrast with *tuchchha*, it would be, therefore, more accurate to contemplate *prātibhāsika* and *vyāvahārika* as "appearance," since they entail some degree of reality as objects of experiential perception.[47] Thus, it appears that the "unreal" (*tuchchha*) of Advaita is of quite a different nature than Ghazālī's "nonexistence" (*'adam*). The former refers to an ontological and epistemological impossibility, which is obviously not the case for Ghazālī's *'adam* in the same sense, since creatures envisaged in their aspect of *'adam* are not self-contradictory as is a barren mother. *'Adam* could refer, however, to the impossibility of the relative to be absolute, and therefore *to be* in a true sense. Ghazālī's inexistence is purely ontological, whereas Advaita's unreal is an epistemological self-contradiction that translates, so to speak, into in-existence. We can see how the two perspectives differ in this respect, the first pertains to being while the second refers to consciousness, or objects of consciousness. Moreover, in referring to the unreal, Deutsch (1980: 26n10) acknowledges that Śaṅkara himself does not treat it as a level of being as such, even though he recognizes it at least implicitly. There is, therefore, a crucial distinction between *asat* and unreality. It must be remembered, in this regard, that the Supreme Brahman is identified as *sat*. *Asat* is therefore strictly speaking that which is not Brahman, and its unreality is therefore only relative to Brahman. By contrast the unreality of a triangular circle is absolute, if one may put it so, on account of the self-contradiction, and therefore impossibility of such a geometric figure.

The consideration of at least three levels or reality, or four if we take into account the distinction between subjective appearance and objective appearance, could lead one to recognize at least as many truths. But it is here that the distinction between

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[46] "In contrast to these three levels of being, the 'non-being' stands as the 'utterly unreal,' the tuchchha, as a pseudo-concept like a barren woman's son or a sky-flower, which cannot even appear as an object of knowledge at any time" (C. Sharma 1996: 180).

[47] We find, for instance, in the works of the sixteenth-century Advaitin Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, a differentiation between the ontological status of the "hare's horn," which is fundamentally unreal (*tuchchha*), and ordinary or cognitive "illusion," *pratibhāsa* and *vyavahāra*. "To the objection that if world-appearances are denied even at the time of perception then they are absolutely unreal like the hare's horn, Madhusūdana replies that though ultimately the indescribable world-appearance (*anir-vachanīya*) and the hare's horn (*tuchchha*) are equally unreal, yet, empirically these two must be distinguished. The indescribable appearance, whether *pratibhāsa* (ordinary illusion) or *vyavahāra* (world-illusion), does appear in knowledge as 'real'…during perception, while the hare's horn cannot even appear in knowledge and is therefore called absolutely unreal" (C. Sharma 1996: 243).

reality and being (*sat*) comes in as a criterion of discernment. Considered from the latter point of view there can only be being or non-being: "Of the unreal no being there is; there is no non-being of the real. Of both these is the truth seen by the seers of the Essence" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.16; Sastry 1977: 34). While reality is given to multiplicity and plurality of levels of experience the distinction between *sat* and *asat* does not. It is absolute in its own way since it involves the Absolute, Brahman. It is this absolute reality of Brahman, as expressed in the *mahāvākya*s of the Upaniṣads, which constitutes the fundamental marker of the Advaitin perspective.

Empirical Existence and the Absolute

How can the intellectual conviction of the exclusive reality of Brahman be compatible with ordinary daily experience? And can the latter play a positive role in the process of spiritual realization of the ultimate Self which is none other than Brahman? The first point to fully emphasize in this regard is the seemingly unbridgeable gap that lies between the ultimate and the empirical. From the point of view of spiritual awakening this relates to a paradox or—from another point of view, a coincidence of opposites, in the sense that there does not appear to be any common measure between the two terms of the metaphysical equation. This is true both for the experience and for the language through which the experience is conveyed. It appears that one has to take hold of both the inaccessibility of the Brahman to human experience and language and to the latter's (limited) abilities to facilitate something that is still strictly speaking ineffable and non-mediatable. In Natalia Isayeva's terms:

> An ordinary person cannot realize *ātman* through inference. The only way open to him is to draw closer to the moment of a sudden leap into the new reality—and take the help of axiomatic and rigid mythological texts. The function of Vedic sayings of a *pāramārthika* level…is unique: even though these *śruti* texts cannot ensure the attainment of *ātman*, they do help an adept to stay in the vicinity of *ātman* by apophatically removing every attribute ascribed to it from the beginning (1993: 120).

While Isayeva puts the matter in terms of the "unsaying"[48] or apophatic function of language, it could also be alluded to its more affirmative conceptual and ritual functions within the context of the tradition. Two points must be highlighted. There has to be something within the field of *vyāvahārika* that points to the *ātman*, since *ātman* is essentially everything. This is evident when considering the prominent role of listening (*śravana*), pondering (*manana*), and assimilating through meditation (*nididhyāsana*) in the Advaitin training. There would be no use for the tradition to spell out a course of moral and spiritual exercise if there were no reality whatsoever to *vyāvahārika*. This is, so to speak, the objective side of the matter. On the subjective side, moreover, there has to be a desire, *mumukṣutva*, and this yearning can only originate empirically from within *vyāvahārika*. There is, humanly speaking, no other possible starting point. From both points of view, the crux of the matter is that the position of the Absolute does not annul the relative. Nor is

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[48] I borrow this term from Sells 1994.

there an incompatibility between the recognition, or realization, of *paramārthika* and the functional reality of *vyāvahārika*. Śaṅkara is quite adamant that the status of *jīvanmukta*, or liberated soul, does not preclude the recognition of phenomenal reality:

> [Brahman] is the Truth of truth, *i.e.* the reality behind "Sat," or earth, water, and fire, and "Tyat" or air and ether, the definite and indefinite forms in nature. There is no contradiction to perception in this denial of the world, for it denies only the transcendental reality of the world and not its Vyâvahârika or phenomenal reality, which remains intact (Vireswarananda 2014: 302).

Thus, Advaita not only recognizes the conventional validity of the point of view according to which the world has been created by the Lord, it also considers it as a pedagogical means easing the way of seekers of the non-dual truth. The conventional is also conceived, in that sense, as propaedeutic and transitional. Accordingly, it cannot be considered only as a concession to error, but it must also be contemplated as a dimension of the truth. Moreover, this recognition, which amounts to an acknowledgment of the "non-non-existence" of *māyā*, cannot be abstracted from its religious, ethical, and even psychological and social contexts. Thus, in his commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, Gauḍapāda himself makes it clear that the metaphysical condescension that is at work in his pedagogical reliance on the existence of substantiality, and therefore on the reality of birth and creation, is predicated upon three sets of conditions.[49] The first one pertains to the ordinary perception of reality, which cannot be utterly annulled as it is plainly a matter of experience. The second is social etiquette, meaning the conventional collective teachings upon which are based "the proper observances of duties pertaining to castes and stages of life." The third one is the wariness that the doctrine of non-creation—*ajāti*, or non-origination, may instill fear in minds that are not mature for it, since it implies the seeming disappearance of that which they take for real.[50] Being has therefore to be transitorily identified with non-being (*asat*) *qua* "taken for being" in order not to lead to a confusion of the former with utter nothingness.

Transactional Reality

Now what is the potential positive contribution of empirical reality to the search for the Absolute and Self-realization? In order to answer this question it is helpful to start with the observation that *vyāvahārika* refers to the practical, the ordinary, or the "business of life." Thus, *vyāvahārika* is sometimes translated by "transactional reality," which connotes interaction and relationship as well as, implicitly, the reality of a common language. It is significant that the term may refer to business

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[49] "For those who, because of perception and adequate behaviour, e.g., proper observance of duties pertaining to castes and stages of life—for those who, because of these two reasons, resort to the declaration of existence of substantiality—for the sake of those who are earnest in their effort, who are faithful, but who are possessed of an inferior kind of discrimination, that birth (creation) has been inculcated by the wise, by the non-dualists" (Rangaswami 2012: 255).

[50] This is rendered as follows in one of the English versions of the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* 4.42: "By the wise…has been preached…'origination' for those who contend that 'things exist'…(and who are) ever frightened of (the doctrine) of non-origination" (Karmarkar 1953: 42).

and holds strong economic connotations. Pertaining semantically to the domain of *artha*, or goods and possessions, it may be said to foster sustenance as a precondition for ultimate knowledge. Recognizing both of these aspects Isayeva characterizes *vyāvahārika* as "profane knowledge" while acknowledging its "intermediate being":

> In Śankara's Advaita the correspondence of *saṃvṛti* is provided by the lower, profane knowledge (*aparavidyā*, or *vyāvahārikavidyā*). It tallies with ordinary worldly practice, *vyāvahāra*. Both this knowledge and the world of experience as a sort of intermediary being, situated between the higher reality and a simple sense error, are posited within the framework of *avidyā* (1993: 192).

The reference to *saṃvṛti* evokes the Buddhist outlook and the Buddha's reference to the "two truths" of the ultimate (*paramārtha*) and the provisional (*saṃvṛti*). However, it has been argued by some scholars that the Advaitin *saṃvṛti* / *vyāvahāra* is marked with more ontological positivity than its *Mādhyamaka* counterpart. As L. Thomas O'Neil puts it, "In Gauḍapāda *saṃvṛti*, used correctly, has a positive purpose; in Nāgārjuna it is seen as having a purpose only in a negative way" (1980: 67). This positive aspect of *saṃvṛti* / *vyāvahāra* in Advaita Vedānta lies in its being grounded in *paramārtha*, of which it is a kind of illusory reflection. O'Neil insists that, for Gauḍapāda, "epistemic truth leads to ontological truth because it is dependent on the absolute and it is an illusion of the absolute" (1980: 66). In a way, *saṃvṛti* pertains to means, *upāya*, while *paramārtha* denotes the end, *upeya*. Thus, in Gauḍapāda's Advaita, on the one hand, "speaking and conception are grounded upon the absolute," on the other hand, the latter is conceived "in terms of the *Upaniṣadic* tradition" (O'Neil 1980: 67). The reality of "business" experience is based on its function as objective step ladder toward spiritual liberation. This starts with the dualistic teachings of the *śruti*, and it continues with the use of language and logic at the service of spiritual liberation.

Now, an excursus into Buddhist concepts of the ultimate, *paramārtha*, and the provisional, *saṃvṛti*, can help us further refine these conclusions. This is all the more so that Buddhist Mādhyamaka and Hindu Advaita have sometimes been sharply contrasted in this regard. Thus, it has been argued that Mādhyamaka, in opposition to Advaita Vedānta, sees *saṃvṛti* as radically false, the recognition of its falseness lying at the foundation of the Buddhist rejection of all views: "Saṃvṛti is totally false; and nothing of it is taken up in forming the paramārtha" (Murti 1955: 252). This radically negative vision of the Buddhist *saṃvṛti* seems excessive, however, if only because it would be self-contradictory for the Buddha—and Nāgārjuna and many others in his wake—to refer to utter error as "truth." In the expression *saṃvṛti-satya*, the word *satya*, truth, must have a real meaning. When Nāgārjuna states that without *saṃvṛti* the ultimate truth could not be reached —"without relying upon the practical, the ultimate is not taught" (King 1995: 121), he highlights the continuum between language and reality, between the conventional world and that of the ultimate. As an evidence to the need for a more balanced view of the ontological and epistemic evaluation of *saṃvṛti* in Mādhyamaka, Richard King has reminded his readers that the word *saṃvṛti* has in fact two

meanings in late Mahāyāna Sanskrit.[51] The first denotes covering and concealment, while the second refers to the actions of turning around, proceeding and advancing (King 1995: 122), evoking thereby the *upāya*. In other words, *saṃvṛti* is obstructing, or it is arising; it is covering reality, or Reality arises from its appearance of reality.

One may also refer, in this connection, to the three meanings of *saṃvṛti* articulated by the seventh-century Mādhyamaka philosopher Candrakīrti in his *Prasannapadā* (The Clear Worded): (1) masking, veil of ignorance, *avidyā*, (2) interdependent existence, and (3) conventional discourse (Murti 1955: 244–45). This is the so-called Prāsaṅgika position, literally "proceeding from a relation," according to which conventionality is inherently entailed by *saṃvṛti*. What is emphasized herein is *saṃvṛti*'s obstructive, negative, or fundamentally contingent character. By contrast, the sixth-century Mādhyamika Bhāviveka refers to the Svātantrika, or pertaining to autonomy or independence, distinction between "false worldly convention" (*mithyasaṃvṛti*) and "true worldly convention" (*tathyasaṃvṛti*) (Fenner 2012: 185–86). Bhāviveka epitomizes Svātantrika Mādhyamaka in recognizing that "worldly convention," and the essentialist logic that presides over it, can constitute—indeed must constitute—a means of access to the truth through syllogism. So the distinction between false and true convention seems to have been envisaged either as that between "defective perception" and "adequate perception"—this is for example the case with Candrakīrti—or as "profane" convention and convention *qua* means of access to the truth, or *upāya*, particularly in matters of logic—this is the case of Bhāviveka.

A consideration of Buddhist perspectives on *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* allows us therefore to confirm that there are two ways, or two tendencies, in terms of understanding the domain of *saṃvṛti*. The first way sharpens the distinction between the conventional and the ultimate by emphasizing the non-reality of the former; this is either in view of affirming the exclusive reality of the Absolute Selfhood, or—with a seemingly opposite intention—in order to eradicate the legitimacy of any "view," or any selfhood. A second type of position, by contrast, takes into account the coefficient of reality of *saṃvṛti-vyāvahāra*—which is obviously nullified from the ultimate point of view, but still fully effective as *upāya* in view of the ultimate. The argument is that in the absence of "true worldly convention," *tathya-saṃvṛti*, there would be only error and truth and no way to proceed from the first to the second. As a summation of these two points of view, it is suitable to refer to Śaṅkara's characterization of the epistemic function of transactional reality:

> Nor should it ever be forgotten, that even this Scriptural statement about creation (by the Lord) is not so in the truest sense, but with reference to the perception of the transactions of names and forms being merely imagined through Nescience, and also because it purports to propound how Brahma is the Self (of everything) (*Brahmasutrābhāṣya* 2.1.33; Apte 1960: 338–39).

Thus, notwithstanding its ultimate non-reality *vyāvahārika* serves as a stepping stone toward realization, or functions as a mediation between duality and non-duality.

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[51] Each of them is actually expressed by two distinct spellings stemming from distinct roots, that is, *saṃvṛti*—from the root -*vṛt* and *saṃvṛti*—from the root -*vṛti*.

Ghazālī's and Śaṅkara's Views of Empirical Existence and Reality

We have seen that both Ghazālī and Śaṅkara highlight, in different ways and within different spiritual parameters, the constructive and transformative function of that dimension of non-reality that points to, or paves the way, to the Real. The *'alam al-mithāl* and *vyāvahārika* are profoundly different in their definitions, contexts, and functions. At the same time, they have in common an ability to serve as ways of access to the ultimate truth. They do so in distinct ways: *mithāl* is ontological and symbolic, whereas *vyāvahārika* is epistemological and pedagogical. While *mithāl* can also be approached as pedagogical, it is so as a Divine pedagogy as it were, one that is inscribed ontologically in the nature of things. By contrast with Ghazālī's sensory ladder and imaginal ship, there is no explicit symbolic vision of the world in Advaita—or at least such a vision is not paramount in the spiritual process of realization. Everything hangs onto a fundamental epistemic discernment between the Brahman, or the *ātman*, and *māyā*.[52] If there is, however, a place for some similarity in Advaita, it is primarily in relation to the religious universe and scriptures. Scriptures, in particular, contain allusions to the non-dual Ultimate. Śaṅkara explains, for instance, that referring to the Brahman as to the bank of a river, or as having four feet, are ways to allude to the Brahman's maintaining of the integrity and differences in the world, on the one hand, and to its infinity, on the other hand (Vireswarananda 2014: 275). Formal depiction is for the sake of "easy comprehension," or pedagogical representation, *upāsanā*, but it does not refer to reality as such. The metaphorical dimension of the teaching is of an epistemological, rather than ontological, import. It helps fashion the meditation of devotees and seekers through similes and analogies. It bridges the gap between the limitedness of human representations and experiences and the Unlimited that is the horizon of the search for true Selfhood. Beyond such a metaphorical function, if one were to look for a genuinely symbolic dimension in Advaita Vedānta it could arguably lie with the scriptural and ritual means of attainment of the Supreme. Still, when considering for instance the *oṃkāra*, the three-lettered sacred syllable that is the underlying and creative sound from which universal existence springs forth, one would have to qualify any symbolic interpretation of its reality by stressing that it is more, here, a question of metaphysical and sacramental identity than one of semantic or cosmic correspondence. *Oṃ* is the Absolute, rather than being *like* the Absolute, or merely pointing to the Absolute: "The same *Ātman* (which has been described above as having four quarters) is, again, *Aum*, from the point of view of the syllables (*akṣaram*)" (Nikhilānanda 1949: 74). The fundamental Sound, or the fundamental Syllable, is none other than the Reality itself.

What is the Real? For Advaita, the question is intrinsically intertwined with an epistemological process of recognition. This point is illustrated *a contrario* by the concept of *tuchchha*, unreality as self-contradiction, which is epistemological and not ontological. Thus, the unreal is understood very differently in Śaṅkara and

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[52] The symbolic and theophanic dimension is brought out, by contrast, in Kashmiri Śaivism, in which the manifold phenomena are conceived as *śaktis* giving potentially access to Paramaśiva (see Dyczkowski 1987).

Ghazālī. *'Adam*, nothingness, is the creature in itself, for itself, by itself. *Tuchchha* is self-contradictory existence, hence non-existence. Similarly, and conversely, there is only one Absolute, the *paramātman*, but different epistemological points of view on it.[53] It is by virtue of this plurality of vantage points that other-than-Brahman or conventional existence can be deemed to be real and effective. In this regard, Advaita's *vyāvahārika* may be estimated to be more "real" than Ghazāli's *mawjūd majāzī*. This observation might seem to run contrary to the stereotypical view of Advaita as teaching that the world is an illusion. By contrast, Islam, and therefore also Ṣūfīsm as Islamic spirituality, would seem to give full reality to this world, as a testing ground of the servants of God. Notwithstanding, it can be argued that Advaita's *māyā* is more real, or less unreal, than Ghazālī's creature in relation to itself. This is so because the latter has broken its ontological connection with the source of its being. In Islam, this amounts to casting off—for human beings, what constitutes the very definition of mankind, its status of servant and vice-regent. Similarly, the consideration of any creature independently of God deprives it of its being, precisely because this creature is ontologically rooted in God's Being. The nothingness of the creature in and of itself is the metaphysical translation of what the Qur'ān refers to as its vainness, or the vain (*bātil*). It literally evokes the void and the null, as well as human vanity, forgetfulness of God, or rebellion against Him. The total surrender of *islām*, based on an emphasis on the exclusiveness and omnipotence of the One God, ends up reducing everything to the status of *bātil*, and *la'ib*—playing, in the negative sense of something that is not serious, hence not substantial and not real. In Advaita, by contrast, the perspective is not centered on the relationship with God. It is focused on the Divine Self that is the essence of all realities. The matter is, therefore, to de-superimpose that which prevents the Self from being known or realized. With Śaṅkara, the key tool is discrimination, or *viveka*. This presupposes, like any other discernment, a consideration of two realities upon which discernment is exercised, precisely. As we have seen, the reality of transactional experience seems to be based on its aspect of objective threshold or step toward liberation. This starts with the dualistic teachings of the *śruti* and continues, first and foremost, with the central relationship with the *guru*. As embodiment of Reality, the *guru* transcends the domain of appearance. By contrast, the metaphorical reality of the creature in Ghazālī's Ṣūfīsm flows from an emphasis on the ontological surrender to the one and only God. What is understood religiously as a submission to God through the observance of His law is like the symbol of a metaphysical reality that takes us beyond religion as commonly understood. It points toward the principle of the exclusive Reality of the One without second. This is the distinction that can be drawn between the credal and metaphysical meanings of the first testimony of faith in Islam. The unicity of the God to worship and the unity of the Reality to be recognized, and known, are both connected and distinguished. This is the metaphysical move from "there is no god to worship but God" to "there is no reality in existence but God," which amounts to asserting that "there is no reality but the Reality."

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[53] In that sense there is definitely a continuity between the Nāgārjunan theory of the Two Truths and Śaṅkarian Advaita: "The Absolute is not one reality set against another, the empirical" (Murti 1955: 141).

Another way to contrast the two approaches to metaphysical unity would be by suggesting that Ghazāli's consideration is centered on being, while Śaṅkarian Advaita focuses on consciousness. The Divine is primarily apprehended by Ghazālī as *wujūd*, while the central focus of Advaita is the realization of the one and only Self. If it be objected that Ghazālī writes about light—which may be symbolically connected with consciousness, it must be added that light is contemplated by him, first and foremost, as the principle of existential manifestation. In other words, there is no manifestation without the light which makes it apparent, without the light itself being apparent. The matter is therefore primarily ontological. By contrast, we find that Śaṅkara, through the concepts of *adhyāsa*, *upadhi*, and *ābhāsa* refer to epistemological realities. Thus, in the *Brahmasutrābhāṣya*, Śaṅkara defines *adhyāsa* as follows:

> If it be asked, "What is it that is called superimposition?"—the answer is: It is awareness, similar in nature to memory, that arises on a different (foreign) basis as a result of some past experience. With regard to this, some say that it consists in the superimposition of the attributes on one thing on another. But others assert that wherever a superimposition on anything occurs, there is in evidence only a confusion arising from the absence of discrimination between them. Others say that the superimposition of anything on any other substratum consists in fancying some opposite attributes on that very basis. From every point of view, however, there is no difference as regards the appearance of one thing as something else. And in accord with this, we find in common experience that the nacre appears as silver, and a single moon appears as two (Gambhirananda 1965: 2–3).

As for *ābhāsa*, it refers to reflection or projection, a kind of imaginative reality linked to impressions of memory.[54] The problem of superimposition, which lies at the core of the Advaitin worldview, is therefore one of mode of awareness or perception, not one of actual being.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, one may sketch a few distinctions between Śaṅkara's and Ghazālī's respective mapping out of the unity of reality. In contrast to the Śaṅkarian emphasis on the modes of consciousness, Ghazālī's degrees of being involve the distinction between *wujūd* and *mawjūd*, being as such versus existentiated beings. While Advaita may appear to be similarly centered on the differentiation between *sat* and *asat*, being and non-being, its core concern is actually *satya*, the truth, and its recognition. *Wujūd* and *satya* lie beyond all delimitations and concepts, but they both entail, in their respective worldviews, a formal system that determine their meanings. On the one hand, metaphysical perspectives express Reality conceptually and symbolically within the determinations of their respective religious or spiritual economy. On the other hand, they envision the Real in such a way as to place It—epistemologically and ontologically—beyond the limitations of their own

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[54] "Śaṅkara repeatedly uses this term in *Upadeśasāhasrī* (US) with the understanding that *ābhāsa* is 'false' (US XVIII:115; XVIII:88)" (Timalsina 2015: 55).

conceptual crystallizations. A perspective is an *upāya*, not only a specific allusion to a Reality that lies beyond any signs, but also a set of means leading to its recognition, or realization. Nevertheless, what these two perspectives have in common is a stratified metaphysics of Unity. By this is meant, first, that they both articulate Ultimate Unity and contingent multiplicity in a way that unconditionally affirms the exclusive—and inclusive, reality of the former in sharp contrast with the non-reality of the latter. It also signifies, secondly, that they envisage multiplicity in function of Unity. They therefore contemplate the various degrees and aspects of this multiplicity with regard to their respective abilities to reflect, approach, or intimate the Ultimate. This is illustrated by the distinction they introduce between aspects of the realm of being-non-being. Ghazālī refers to the metaphorical and the "parabolic," *majāz* and *mithāl*, while Advaita distinguishes between the subjective and the objective conventional reality-unreality, and within the latter between the insubstantial and the propaedeutic dimensions thereof. If one had to sum up the distinct character of each of the two speculative articulations, it could be proposed that Ghazālī's perspective is metaphysical on religious grounds, by contrast with Advaita which could be deemed to be religious on metaphysical grounds. In other words, it could be argued that Ghazālī's formulation of the most rigorously non-dualistic view of Reality is like the metaphysical culmination of a religious imperative of exclusive worship based *a priori* on revelation and scripture; religion comes first, metaphysics is like its fulfillment. By contrast, the Śaṅkarian tradition integrates the scriptural, moral, and ritual components of the religious system, as authoritative and propaedeutic supports, to a contemplation of Reality that is steeped, first and foremost, in the metaphysical discrimination of the Ultimate Selfhood. Thus, both traditions respond to distinct needs and contexts. Human diversity is provided with the manifold conceptual and religious wherewithal made available within this conventional reality of ours.

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